

Lucian Freud : the Last Figurative ?

by Jeanne Calmont

From my divan, I observe the public auction results for the artwork of the grandson of the father of psychoanalysis: Lucian Freud (b. 1922).

On the eve of the opening of a retrospective tribute consecrated to his work at The Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou (March 10-July 19, 2010), I wonder how much the work of someone considered to be one of the most important living artists sells for and, beyond that, if he is one of the last major figurative painters.



Lucian Freud, *Self-Portrait with a Black Eye*, approx. 1978, oil on canvas, 18,8 x 14,3cm, Sotheby's

Self-Portrait with a Black Eye, which sold for the Hammer Price of 2,847,000 GBP at Sotheby's on the 10th of February 2010 during the London session of Contemporary Art, is a work that could have been among the fifty paintings shown at the Centre Pompidou. In many respects, this small canvas (18.8 x 14.3 cm) painted around 1978 is exemplary of the work of English artist born in Berlin.

Looking first at the subject matter, the auto portrait is a constantly reoccurring theme from this ironic and uncompromising artist who produces his image by looking in the mirror, either discretely, as a figure in the background of the workshop, or voluntarily, centered in a frontal position on the canvas. Here, on the narrow canvas, his puffy face is caught and truncated in order to allow us to focus on the real subject of the work: the black eye that disfigures his left profile.

Highlighting defects and damage to the flesh, is another characteristic of the work of this English brawler who caused scandal in 2001 by creating a portrait of Queen Elizabeth straight out of a

crusher and is justified in declaring "It's not that I liked to fight, it's just that people tell me things for which I feel the only response is to hit them." Here, the painter crystallizes the marks from night altercation with a taxi driver he doesn't even remember.

The treatment of the matter of this self-portrait is symptomatic of Lucian Freud's manner: after a period of obsession to detail using any icy and smooth technique, he inaugurates the 1980s with a new method where the thickness supersedes the glazes. He who said "to represent himself, he must try to paint as if he were someone else. In the self-portrait, the likeness, is something else. I have to paint what I feel without falling into expressionism" loses none of his sharpness by superimposing layers of paint into opaque complexions ranging from dull pink to dark brown embellished with white lead paint. Here the texture is thick and stringy eloquent: it marks the troubled circumstances of the episode.

Never on the market, exposed, nor reproduced during thirty years, this is the type of work that excites collectors: it was acquired by Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich who we remember bought *The Benefits Supervisor Sleeping* (1995, oil on canvas, 151.3 x 219cm) on May 13, 2008 at Christie's (New York), for an auction record of €19,404,000, making Lucian Freud, the most expensive contemporary artist living in front of the previous titleholder, the American Jeff Koons. The next day (May 14, 2008) at Sotheby's (New York), he set another record by paying €49,657,300 for *Triptych* (1976, oil on canvas, 198 x 147.5 cm) by Francis Bacon (1909-1992). It dates from 1945, the year when Bacon and Freud, who jointly founded the School of London, and painted several respective portraits of one another, met. Among the portraits painted *The Portrait of Francis Bacon* (1956, oil on canvas, 35.5 x 35.5 cm) by Lucian Freud was sold for €6,191,520 on October 19, 2008 at Christie's (London). Painted four years after the one displayed at the Tate (before it was stolen in 1988), it reflects the proximity of the two artists, the evolution of Freud's art in contact with Bacon's, and the resulting maturity. The unfinished and intimate work simulates by its layout, the proximity between the painter and his model, whom Freud remembers saying, "Once I met him I saw him a lot." The heavy dough-like face rising like a shroud of white canvas, shows, that even before the 1980s Lucian Freud, concerned with the effect of light on the inconsistent flesh of the model, has a taste for matter.



Lucian Freud, *Portrait de Francis Bacon*, 1956, huile sur toile, 35,5 x 35,5cm, C Christie's

As witnessed masterfully in *The Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, the artist is obsessed by flesh, to the point that he forbade his models (including the muse Sue Tilley called Big Sue) from exposing themselves to sunlight in order to preserve the skin's whiteness and repeated, "I want the painting to be flesh." If the landscapes (including the factory views from his workshop's window) are uncommon in auction houses, that is not the case for his great nudes painted in the confined space of his studio, for which the Beaubourg exhibition makes extensive reference. Lying on the deformed sofas which allow us to identify the painter's wretched workshop, women took positions that allow us to see the raw details of every scrutinized and carefully made inch of the body, which are enhanced by "blasts of cremnitz white", and sharpened by the artificial lighting of the workshop. Among the top works one finds *Naked Portrait with Reflection* (1980) which sold for €13,272,000 at Christie's (London) in June 2008 and *Naked Woman Perched on a Chair* (1994) which sold for €4,319 190 at Christie's (New York) in November 2005.



Lucian Freud, *The Benefits Supervisor Sleeping*, 1995, oil on canvas, 151,3 x 219cm, Christie's

Like many studio portraits, these nude women rank among Freud's work, along with the other portraits, as some of the most expensive. Among these portraits, we must mention the *Portrait of Bruce Bernard* (photographer, publisher and English historian) of which there are two versions, one seated and one standing, which were sold back to back for €4,589,865 at Sotheby's (London) in February 2006 and for €10,362,100 at Christie's (London) in June 2007. The same is true of *The Portrait of John Deakin* (British photographer) which went twice at public auction, once in June 1997 at Christie's (London) for €1,191,960 and then ten years later, in June 2006 at Sotheby's (London) for an almost doubled amount of €2,197,200. If none of the imposing portraits of Leigh Bowery (designer, performer, nightclubber, leader of the London avant-gardism of the 1980s and inspiration to many artists) has yet gone up for auction, odds are that such a work would take the cake.

Going back to the omnipresent portrait theme in these drawings, Lucian Freud also creates

them in copper. His etchings (an engraving technique preferred by painters, as opposed to chiseling) are negotiated (using the year 2009 as a reference) between 3,000 and 27,000 Euros for *Painter's Mother*, 1982 (Bloomsbury Auctions, London, June 25, 2009). Two years after *Lucian Freud and The Painter's Etchings* at MoMA, the Centre Pompidou exhibition allows, through a selection of graphic works, a look at the black and white portraits from someone considered to be the most important (and perhaps last) figurative artist from the second half of the twentieth century. At 88-years-old Lucian Freud repeats: "For me, the painting is the person."

Hypnosis works.

Note: Hammer prices indicated

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